



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics. By Sophia Vasalou Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016 Hardback. ix, 342 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-939783-9.

Citation for published version:

Mustafa, AR 2018, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics. By Sophia Vasalou Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016 Hardback. ix, 342 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-939783-9.', *The Muslim World*, vol. 108, no. 3, pp. 576-581. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12250>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/muwo.12250](https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12250)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Muslim World

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Mustafa, AR 2018, 'Review of: Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics. By Sophia Vasalou Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016' *The Muslim World*., which has been published in final form at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/muwo.12250>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics. By Sophia Vasalou Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016.
Hardback. ix, 342 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-939783-9.

Abdul Rahman Mustafa

This book is a long overdue and formidable study of the ethical thought of Ibn Taymiyya. It is the modern appropriation of a set of ideas commonly associated with Ibn Taymiyya – namely that Islam is a religion that is entirely compatible with nature and reason (*fiṭra*) – that prefaces Vasalou's deeper study of Ibn Taymiyya's views on the role of reason and revelation as sources of ethical knowledge. Vasalou begins by pointing out that one of Ibn Taymiyya's primary scholarly preoccupations was to chart a theological *via media*, one that traversed a middle path between rival theological sects such as the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites, and in the process to champion the synthesis of revelation and reason. Now Ibn Taymiyya might often use the vocabulary of objective rationalism, Vasalou says, but it would be mistake to take this as an indication of his agreement with the Mu'tazilite position that the ethical value of acts is inherent to them and is capable of being perceived by objective reason. In fact, Vasalou states at the very outset that one of the main claims of her book is that: "...Ibn Taymiyya's claim of moral reason, examined more closely, turns out to be a rather misleading one" (p.6).

Chapters 1 to 5 of the book expand on this central claim in various ways. In Chapter 1 Vasalou shows that the Mu'tazilites account of ethics was strongly deontological, whereas Ibn Taymiyya's ethical theory is largely consequentialist in nature. Chapter 2 investigates Ibn Taymiyya's account of the relationship between reason (*ʿaql*) and nature (*fiṭra*), with Vasalou concluding once again that, while celebrating *fiṭra* as a source of moral knowledge, Ibn Taymiyya also emphasizes the limitations of reason in providing knowledge of the ethical value of acts. In

Chapter 3 Vasalou suggests that, far from being close to the Mu'tazilite camp, Ibn Taymiyya's views on the role of reason in determining right and wrong are resonant of Ash'arī thinking on the subject. Chapter 4 surveys some of the theological differences between the theology of Ibn Taymiyya, in which the wisdom and love of God are central concepts, and Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite *kalām*, in which the wisdom and love of God are formally denied. Chapters 4 and 5 also explore the relationship between welfare (*maṣlaḥa*) as a theological and legal concept in the works of the Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites and Ibn Taymiyya. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a counterpoint to the classical discussions that form the substance of the book by briefly surveying the ways in which some modern Muslim figures have conceived of Islam as a religion of *fiṭra*.

A real strength of Vasalou's book is that it avoids superficial readings of the source material. Acknowledging that Ibn Taymiyya's terminology often has a "mercurial character" (p. 98), that his views are located within a cacophony of quotations from the works of his interlocutors and that his ideas are scattered across a vast array of works of different genres, Vasalou bravely persists in her heroic attempt to read Ibn Taymiyya holistically. She attempts to harmonize her subject's seemingly dissonant views to offer a fuller picture of his intellectual stance – and does so conscious of the fact that this means she is ultimately offering her readers a "construction" (p. 223) of Ibn Taymiyya's thought – one possible way of reading him without foreclosing other interpretations or constructions. Vasalou favors this method over the method of accounting for conceptual dissonances by hypothesizing about "diverging textual chronologies" (p. 127). Similarly, when it comes to reconciling the apparent tension between the Ash'arite insistence that ethical judgments are grounded in human convention and the Ash'arite claim that ethical

judgments are grounded in human nature, Vasalou offers a constructive reading that attempts to reconcile these antinomies (p. 125).

The book identifies consequentialism as the central pillar of Ibn Taymiyya's ethical theory. We are told that it is the notion of utility or welfare (*maṣlaḥa*) that carries moral ultimacy in Ibn Taymiyya's scheme of ethics (pp. 29, 34). Good – understood as that which is “pleasurable, beneficial or agreeable” (p. 35) – is, we are told, determined for Ibn Taymiyya by looking at the consequences of acts. This is contrasted with the strongly deontological bent of Mu'tazilite theories of ethics which held that good and evil were qualities inherent within acts. But there are also suggestions in Vasalou's own discussion that the distance between Ibn Taymiyya's theory and that of the Mu'tazilites might not be so great after all. In Mu'tazilite ethical theory itself, we are told “... even the strongest deontological affirmations turn out to have roots that are watered by deeper consequentialist considerations.” (p. 32.) This qualification about the centrality of consequentialism in Mu'tazilite account of ethics rings like a refrain throughout the book (see pp. 33, 41, 52, 100, 134). Sometimes, Vasalou herself finds it difficult to fully reconcile the varying resonances in Ibn Taymiyya's ethical theory, which frequently speaks of good and evil in purely or predominantly deontological terms. Vasalou's statement that Ibn Taymiyya offers “an account of the value of actions that is articulated *exclusively* in consequentialist terms.” (p. 184, emphasis mine) certainly sits in some tension with her claim that the notion of inherent right and good that the Mu'tazilites had deployed widely in their ethical theory, is after all, “not entirely absent from Ibn Taymiyya's writings” (p. 185).

Ibn Taymiyya's real disagreement with the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites is, Vasalou argues, predominantly theological rather than purely epistemological. Unlike the Ash'arites, Ibn

Taymiyya insists that “if human beings can act for moral reasons, so, a fortiori, does God.” (p. 38). What Ibn Taymiyya finds intolerable is the view associated with certain followers of Ibn ‘Arabī (p. 86) and Ash‘arites such as al-Ghazālī, who insist that disbelief and faith “are all equal as far as God is concerned” (p. 141). God’s commands are not random, Ibn Taymiyya insists. Rather, they are “grounded in the real ethical qualities of acts” (p. 140). God’s commands and prohibitions follow the “intrinsic merit of things in themselves” (p. 168). However, unlike the Mu‘tazilites, Ibn Taymiyya also wants to insist that God is not bound by morality because of any judgment reached by human reason. Rather, God chooses to issue ethical commands as a consequence of His love and His desire to bring about “praiseworthy consequences.” Ibn Taymiyya therefore sees divine beneficence as the factor that give God’s will its rational ground, leading it in a particular direction (p. 141). In short, God issues the commands He does because He loves them and He loves them because they serve the welfare of His creation (p. 168).

Much of Vasalou’s argument for distinguishing Ibn Taymiyya’s notion of reason from that of the Mu‘tazilites is based on her deconstruction of Ibn Taymiyya’s notion of innate disposition or nature (*fiṭra*). In Ibn Taymiyya’s presentation, Vasalou argues, *fiṭra* is both a basis for ethical knowledge and also a principle of desire that has benefit as its primary object (p. 69). This leads us to a conclusion that is not entirely new in Taymiyyan studies: Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of natural reason accords a more ambivalent role to reason than the one it enjoyed in Mu‘tazilite theories of ethics. Vasalou is also not alone in pointing to a certain circularity in Ibn Taymiyya’s ideas here, namely that Ibn Taymiyya’s “claim that we know right and wrong by reason is partly given as a claim that we desire right and hate wrong” (p. 68).

What, Vasalou wonders, are we to make of Ibn Taymiyya's "equivocation" between nature reason and desire, his "elision" between the descriptive and normative (p. 114). How can we account for the identification of the good with the beneficial and the beneficial with the desirable? (p. 82). Vasalou seems dissatisfied with the answer she herself alludes to when she points out that what first appears to be an appeal to "pure reason" in Ibn Taymiyya turns out to be "an appeal to the human mind as already informed by divine speech" (p. 243). But why should this be unsatisfactory? As Rowan Williams argues in *The Edge of Words*,¹ the human attempt to account for the world is not a self-generated thing. There can be no 'pure' reason independent of nature because our attempt to reason about the world occurs in response to, but also from within, the 'nature' in which we find ourselves. The "slippage" (p. 120) between the language of reason and the language of desire to which Vasalou draws attention is thus not particular to Ibn Taymiyyah or any particular group of theologians. Rather, it is an inescapable feature of any account of reality that takes our embeddedness in nature and our responses to certain kinds of acts as a given fact. Ibn Taymiyya advances precisely such an account of reality, one in which our knowledge of ethical propositions is grounded in human nature and human desire, with the acknowledgment that people can also find wrongdoing to be a pleasure object of desire (p. 88). But do such "natural desires whose satisfaction may not be in our interests" (p. 120) fall within Ibn Taymiyya's conception of *fiṭra*? Vasalou seems to think that they might, although she accepts that it is also possible to read Ibn Taymiyya as reserving the term *fiṭra* for "a higher-order desire directed to the true good" (p. 89).

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

How then, does Ibn Taymiyya distinguish between proper desires and sound reason and improper desires and unsound reason? The answer is, of course, through divine revelation. But it is not – or ought not to be – a revelation to us that an arch-traditionalist such as Ibn Taymiyya continues to harbor “textualist commitments” (p.9) even when celebrating the role of reason. Yet Vasalou explicates this seemingly obvious fact at great length, perhaps in order to draw attention to scholars who, in her view, have been too quick to ignore the scripturalist foundations of Ibn Taymiyya’s account of reason. For instance, she signals her disagreement with Opwis’ analysis of Ibn Taymiyya’s account of *maṣlaḥa* (p. 211). Ibn Taymiyya’s writings on *maṣlaḥa* might suggest that it can potentially encompass “all that is beneficial to human society” (p. 204) or that he is speaking of welfare “independently of textual guidance” (p. 205) but in actual fact, Vasalou argues, Ibn Taymiyya’s claim of ethical rationalism tilts towards “the regulating framework of scripture” (p. 209) to distinguish sound reason from its unsound variants. Since reason, in Ibn Taymiyya’s view, is capable of all manner of “fractiousness and disorder” (p. 231) it is revelation that ultimately identifies true rationality (p. 236) and true *maṣlaḥa*.

While Vasalou makes a strong case for paying attention to the privileged position of revelation in Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of *maṣlaḥa*, she does not offer a similarly robust defense of her claim that Ibn Taymiyya’s views on *maṣlaḥa* appear to be aligned to “the more textualist view of welfare commonly identified with al-Ghazālī” (p. 210). This is partly because she does not consider the range of senses in which Ibn Taymiyya uses the term *maṣlaḥa*, nor the ways in which he deploys the concept in his legal works (particularly his legal responses to queries on ritual law) in ways that show the gulf separating him from the Ash‘arites. Vasalou must acknowledge that in Ibn Taymiyya’s view it is by honoring the demands of God’s divinity that

“human beings realize their highest good” (p. 177), but her attempt to incorporate this within the kind of consequentialist account she associates with Ibn Taymiyya – arguing that for Ibn Taymiyya even obedience and worship of God are consequentialist because they constitute the *welfare* of human beings – is implausible.

A more plausible reading of Ibn Taymiyya would recognize that when he talks about obedience and worship constituting a human being’s higher good, he is not addressing the question of what benefits a human but of what it means to be fully human in the first place. This becomes clear when we consider Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion on human perfection in his *Şafadiyya* (which does not appear in the bibliography). In that work, which attacks the views of philosophers such as al-Fārābī, who had linked human perfection to happiness, virtue and the knowledge of philosophy², Ibn Taymiyya talks about worship and loving obedience to God constituting human perfection (*kamāl*), happiness (*sa‘āda*) and rectitude (*ṣalāh*) together. Ibn Taymiyya does not regard worship as a consequentialist means to an end. For him, to be a perfect human is to be happy and this perfection and happiness are realized only through the loving obedience of God.³

Another omission in the presentation of Ibn Taymiyya’s account of *maṣlaḥa* strikes the reader when she encounters Vasalou’s claim that in Ibn Taymiyya’s account of divine welfare, human beings can never comprehend why an omnipotent God would create a world in which good is often intertwined with evil (p. 174) and in which God punishes evil with torment in the afterlife (pp. 184, 190). But as Jon Hoover has demonstrated (in a work on Ibn al-Qayyim that does not appear in the bibliography), Ibn Taymiyya has a great deal to say on the purposes and benefits

² Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyya*, ed. Fawzī Najjār. (Bayrūt: al-Maṭba‘a al-Kāthūlikiyya, 1964).

³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Şafadiyya*, ed. Muḥammad R. Sālim. (Riyad: n.p, 1406), 2:242.

of divine punishment. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya's ideas on divine punishment (which served as the inspiration for Ibn al-Qayyim's views on the subject) are based on the same theodicy that informs his theological writings and both he and Ibn al-Qayyim advance a view on the wisdom of punishment and the possibility of universal redemption from punishment that is arrestingly optimistic.⁴

There are, as there are bound to be, some inconsequential errors in the book. Sadat does not belong in a register of "extremist Islamist ideologues" (p. 11). It is also not accurate to say of the Ash'arites that they held that "there was a time when God had not yet spoken, and then there was a time when he had." (p. 212). Nevertheless, this book represents a major advance in the study of Taymiyyan studies in particular and Islamic intellectual history in general, and it is one of Vasalou's great strengths that she can bring Islamic intellectual thought into dialogue with major figures and schools in Western philosophy in a way that few others could.

⁴ Jon Hoover "Islamic Universalism: Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya's Salafi Deliberations on the Duration of Hell-Fire" 99 (1) *The Muslim World* 99.1 (2009): 181-201.